Autumn visions: war and the imagery of Muhammad Khudayyir

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Abstract

The modern history of Iraq as a nation state has been affected by repeated conflict and war. Iraqi writers have engaged with this fraught reality in their works. For example, some of the early short stories by Muḥammad Khuḍayyir (b. 1942) were clearly influenced by the atmosphere in the aftermath of the 1967 war, while the stories he wrote in the 1980s responded indirectly to the reality of the situation in Basra during the long war with Iran. However, his fiction is unlike anything else in contemporary Arabic literature and its difficulty has meant few critics have discussed it in detail. This article traces the development of Khudayyir's fiction, with a particular focus on the use of imagery in a selection of his key stories from the 1970s and 1980s, some of which were re-published and re-evaluated in the 1990s and 2000s.

The increasingly unconventional and oblique ways in which he represents, and responds to, war allow Khuḍayyir to articulate an original narrative discourse that is alternative to both the official pro-war rhetoric promoted by the Baʿth party during its time in power, and the prevailing depiction of the Iraqi reality in the works of more highly acclaimed Iraqi writers today.

Keywords: War, Iraqi fiction, Imagery, Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, Difficulty

أستطيع أن أقول أن نسق الكتابة الأدبية في العراق هو نسق حربي، معبأ بالرموز التدميرية، وقلما تقرأ نصاً حديثاً يتجنب هذا المعجم. قاموس الحرب في الأدب العراقي كبير ويتطلب تشذيبه.

محمد خضير [1]

[1] Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, "al-Qiṣṣah al-ʿirāqiyyah al-yawm nawʿ maḥallī raththh [Iraqi Fiction Today is a Provincial, Shabby Type (of Fiction)]," interview by ʿAdnān al-Hilālī, *Al-Safīr*, 18 January (2013),

I'd say that the fictional mode in Iraq is one of war, laden with symbols of destruction. You rarely read a new text that avoids this lexicon. The lexicon of war in Iraqi literature is huge and needs pruning.

Muḥammad Khuḍayyir

Introduction

Muḥammad Khuḍayyir (born in Basra in 1942) is one of the most significant Iraqi writers to emerge after the writers of the so-called '1950s generation,' with whom Iraqi fiction reached artistic maturity: ʿAbd al-Malik Nūrī, Fuʾād al-Takarlī, Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān and Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr.[2] Khuḍayyir built on their achievements to create highly original fictional works that make him stand out from his peers. However, his unconventional technique and increasingly original concept of narrative fiction, examples of which are demonstrated extensively in what follows, have resulted in his being criticised by some Iraqi commentators, while he has been largely ignored outside Iraq.

In this article we will discuss the development of Khuḍayyir's fiction by focusing on the various ways in which he represents war in some of the stories he wrote in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of these were re-published in the 1990s and 2000s and Khuḍayyir has revisited them in his recent non-fictional writings. We will also aim to show how Khuḍayyir's work responds to war in a way that is original within the Iraqi context.

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http://assafir.com/Article/212/299011/AuthorArticle.

[2] See Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham, *The Iraqi Novel: Key Writers, Key Texts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

In the absence of detailed scholarly commentary on Khuḍayyir's works outside the Arab world, we will in the present article forego any detailed comparison of Khuḍayyir's works with those of other Iraqi writers and focus on his works almost exclusively. We also quote extensively from Arab critics of Khuḍayyir's work and from Khuḍayyir's own comments on his writing practices. We hope that this will encourage others to take up some of the ideas here and build on them in more extensive comparative work. Similarly, as hardly any of Khuḍayyir's works have been translated from Arabic, we will allow ourselves to quote longer extracts from the works under discussion than is normally the practice. We feel that at this stage of English-language research into Arabic fiction, there is still too little detailed textual analysis of individual texts, particularly more complex and abstruse ones, and for various reasons the emphasis is rather on wide-ranging surveys of writers and their works, or on various theoretical approaches, which sometimes run the risk of focusing on the theories at the expense of useful evaluations of the poetic and aesthetic qualities of the writings.

It can be argued that the Six Day War of 1967 was a point of rupture that initiated a crucial phase in contemporary Arab culture, perhaps more emphatically than other key events, such as WWII, 1948 (the creation of the state of Israel), the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990, 2003 (the invasion of Iraq) and the more recent events triggered by the Arab revolutions. The 1967 war can be seen as the end of a certain Pan-Arab, nationalistic, secular project of modernisation, which had its roots in the *Nahḍah*, a series of reformist or revolutionary movements that started in the 19th century and culminated in the creation of independent nation states in the Arab world.

The 1967 war had a palpable impact on Khuḍayyir,[3] who started writing short stories in the early 1960s while he was working as a school teacher in remote areas of the Iraqi

[3] Khuḍayyir describes the June 1967 war as a "new dividing line in [our] awareness of the practice of writing." Khuḍayyir, "al-Qiṣṣah al-ʿirāqiyyah al-yawm."

countryside. Khuḍayyir, a writer known to shun publicity, has consistently chosen to observe the many violent events of his time and place as if from the sidelines;[4] these include the bloody clashes between nationalists and communists that followed the 1963 coup;[5] the 1967 war; the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war; the 1991 Gulf War and its aftermath; the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the current sectarian violence in the country. As we will see below, the fact that Khuḍayyir observed these events from the sidelines does not mean that he did not experience their violence directly (in fact, he remained in Basra while the city was bombed, first by the Iranians and then by the coalition forces led by the Americans), but it means that he chose to write about them in an indirect, oblique way. This choice differentiates Khuḍayyir from many other Iraqi writers who write texts in which they give a more direct account of their own experiences of war and violence. These latter novels work as testimonies and political denunciations of the Iraqi reality from Saddam to today.[6] Khuḍayyir has consistently defended his freedom to write about this reality in his own way, even if this aesthetic choice

[4] Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, "Ḥiwār maʿa al-qāṣṣ Muḥammad Khuḍayyir [An Interview with the Writer Muḥammad Khuḍayyir]," interview by Saʿdūn Halīl, *Al-Ḥiwār al-mutamaddin* February 9 (2014),

http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=399815.

[5] Khuḍayyir was sent to teach in small schools in remote areas of the Iraqi countryside as a punishment for his leftist political sympathies (see Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, "al-Washm al-baghdādī.. Ilā ʿAbd al-Malik Nūrī [The Baghdadi Tattoo: To ʿAbd al-Malik Nūrī]," *Kuttāb al-ʿIrāq: minbar al-kātib al-ʿirāqī* June 08 (2012), http://www.iraqiwriters.com/inp/view.asp?ID=3116). See also "Jiwār al-wajh: kaʾs al-qadr [Next to the Face: the Cup of Destiny]," a story/testimony of the torture practised by the post-1963 regime to punish its opponents, in Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh: aqniʿah wa-ḥikāyāt* [The Gardens of Faces: Veils and Tales] (Damascus: Dār al-madā, 2008), 41-45.

[6] See the novels analysed by Ikram Masmoudi in Ikram Masmoudi, *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

was partly dictated by personal and wider circumstances. Recently, Khuḍayyir wrote as follows:

فيما يخص حياتي الأدبية، دربتني مصادفات الحقبتين الستينية والسبعينية، وابتعادي مدة عقدين تقريباً عما أحسبه "بلادة" [الكلمة لِبوريس باسترناك] السياسة واحتكار سلطاتها الثقافية والحزبية، على تفادي حتمية الارتباط السياسي بالحقبة التالية لهما خلال حرب الثماني سنوات بين العراق وإيران. ثمة انتقالات وظيفية، واعتبارات ريفية، خدمتني في الابتعاد عن تفاعلات السياسة والأدب في تلك الفترتين من القرن العشرين وما تبعهما من عقود ازداد فيها جنون السياسة ونشط غولها في ابتلاع الكائنات الأدبية الهشة وغير المجربة.[7]

As regards my literary life, chance occurrences in the 1960s and 1970s, and the fact that I was far removed for roughly two decades from what I considered to be the "stupidity" [to use Boris Pasternak's term] of politics and the monopoly of culture by political parties, trained me to avoid the inevitable linking of literature with politics that occurred during the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran. Moving around in my job and having time to think when I was in the countryside served to keep me at a distance from the interactions between politics and literature in those two decades of the 20th century and subsequent decades, when politics grew increasingly frenzied and the monster of politics energetically devoured fragile and inexperienced literary creatures.

[7] Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, "al-Adab wa-l-siyāsah: sikkīn fī al-thalj [Literature and Politics: a Knife in the Snow]," *Al-Ṣabāḥ* 12 December (2015),

https://www.facebook.com/mohammed.khudair/posts/10153732089002305:0.

This distance is an important element in our definition of Khuḍayyir as a contemporary writer whose writing has been influenced by war. Khuḍayyir's positioning himself on the fringes of bloody events and his unwillingness to conform to, or to represent conventionally, the reality surrounding him, correspond to Giorgio Agamben's idea of the truly contemporary: "Those who are truly contemporary [...] are those who neither perfectly coincide with [the present], nor adjust themselves to its demands [...] [P]recisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable of perceiving and grasping their own time]."[8] Khuḍayyir states that while writing about his vision of an imaginary Basra he was looking for a fictional style [*nawʿ qiṣaṣī*] that was 'not embroiled in a satire on the reality of the day, but did not succumb to its vicissitudes.'[9] In other words, he wanted neither to appear to side with the regime nor to limit his writing to mere satire.

Although the Iraqi critic and writer Salām ʿAbbūd maintains that this does not mean Khuḍayyir's attitude towards this reality is escapist, 'narcotised,'[10] Khuḍayyir has been criticised, at times vehemently, for appearing to endorse *distance* and *anachronism*, to use Agamben's terms, as he has moved farther away in his writing from a realistic depiction of the events surrounding him.[11] Within the Iraqi literary context, the conventional way of

[8] Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 41.

[9] Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah* [The New Tale] (Amman: Dār azminah lil-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 1995), 84.

[10] Salām ʿAbbūd, *Thaqāfat al-ʿunf fī al-ʿIrāq* [The Culture of Violence in Iraq] (Cologne: Manshūrāt al-jamal, 2002), 293.

[11] For example, some critics and writers have accused Khuḍayyir of pursuing an interest in world fiction at the expense of his 'Iraqiness': '[writers like Borges and Calvino] have removed his Iraqi clothes and left him to walk naked in a strange land. How can this great talent abandon his identity?', Quaṣy al-Khafājī, "Ḥiwār maʿa

representing war and conflict has often been based on a solidly mimetic realism. This not only applies to the novelists of the '1950s generation' mentioned above, but also to the many writers who engaged directly with the Iran-Iraq war in their works. Elsewhere we have noted how Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr's realistic writing dealt specifically with the war and its effect on Iraqi society in some of his novels.[12] As Amir Moosavi clearly shows, the realistic approach is not only adopted by the writers who were officially sanctioned by the regime, but also by those who, especially after the war, wrote narratives which were critical of the war and the regime.[13]

1. After 1967: The Black Kingdom

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al-qāṣṣ Quaṣy al-Khafājī [An Interview with Quaṣy al-Khafājī]," interview by Saʿdūn al-Halīl, *Al-Ḥiwār al-mutamaddin* 4128, 19 June (2013),

http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=364893.

[12] Caiani and Cobham, *The Iraqi Novel*, 163-193.

[13] See for example Amir Moosavi, "How to Write Death: Resignifying Martyrdom in Two Novels of the Iran-Iraq War," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 35 (2015), 9-31; Amir Moosavi, "Stepping Back from the Front: A Glance at Home Front Narratives of the Iran-Iraq War in Persian and Arabic Fiction," in Arta Khakpour, Shouleh Vatanabadi and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami (eds), *Moments of Silence: Authenticity in the Cultural Expressions of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 120-137.

Khuḍayyir's short story "al-Baṭṭāt al-baḥriyyah" ("The Sea Ducks") won a competition run by the literary supplement of the newspaper *al-Jumhūriyyah* in 1966.[14] Shortly afterwards, the publication of "al-Arjūḥah" ("The Swing") in *al-Ādāb* in Beirut made him more widely known in the Arab world, particularly as the story was singled out for praise by the periodical's influential editor-in-chief, Suhayl Idrīs.[15] "Al-Arjūḥah" was later included in Khuḍayyir's first short story collection, *al-Mamlakah al-sawdāʾ* (The Black Kingdom), published in 1972 in Baghdad. The collection includes stories written between 1966 and 1971 and is divided into two parts. Khuḍayyir makes it clear that the stories in the second part were influenced specifically by the war of June 1967 and 'the war in the North', a reference to the Kurdish conflict.[16] Even so, as we will show below, they are sombre reflections on the consequences of modern warfare in general and do not include direct accounts of any particular war.

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[14] Jinān Jāsim Ḥillāwī, "Mamlakat Muḥammad Khuḍayyir al-qiṣaṣiyyah: qirāʾah taḥlīliyyah [Muḥammad Khuḍayyir's Fictional Kingdom: an Analytical Reading]," *Al-Thaqāfah al-jadīdah* 298 (1997),

http://www.althakafaaljadeda.com/298/art10.htm.

[15] Information given in the unattributed introduction to each of the following: Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif* [An Autumn Vision] (Amman: Dār azminah lil-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ,1995), 5; Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah*, 5; Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Kurrāsat Kānūn* [The Winter Sketchbook] (Amman: Dār azminah lil-nashr wa-l-tawzīʿ, 2004 [2001]), 5).

[16] See for example Khuḍayyir, "al-Qiṣṣah al-ʿirāqiyyah al-yawm" and Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, "Nisāʾ *al-Mamlakah al-sawdāʾ* kulluhunna ḥaqīqiyyāt [The Women in (my short story collection) *al-Mamlakah al-sawdāʾ* are all Real (Women)]," interview by Ḥaydar ʿAbd al-Muḥsin and Saʿd Muḥammad Raḥīm, *Imḍāʾ* 3-4 (2013), 228. See also Mālik al-Muṭallibī and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ṭahmāzī, *Mirʾāt al-sard: qirāʾah fī adab Muḥammad Khuḍayyir* [The Mirror of Narrative: a Reading of the literature of Muḥammad Khuḍayyir] (Baghdad: Dār al-kharīf lil-Ṭibāʿah wa-l-nashr, 1990), 22.

In *Mamlakah* we are invited to think about war in general, but always through very specific depictions of the impact of war on people without power: the traumatised soldier, the soldier on leave and his lover, the women often depicted as waiting for their husbands or lovers to come back from the front, sometimes in vain. Throughout the collection, Khuḍayyir focuses on the marginalised members of society, there is no mention of brave deeds or war heroes, and women are often the main characters. So at this point in Khuḍayyir's writing we see elements of the modern realism already exemplified in the work of earlier Iraqi writers, and classically defined by Auerbach, when the latter writes of "the rise of […] socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation" and "the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history."[17] The stories are set in generally familiar environments but, as we will see below, the striking quality of the imagery deployed gives the reader an unusual and often disturbing perspective on events and characters and signals the increasingly intricate perspective on war and related events taken by Khuḍayyir in his later work.

Three stories included in the second part of *Mamlakah* demonstrate (better than the much more widely acclaimed and reprinted "al-Arjūḥah") the eclectic and dynamic use of imagery in Khuḍayyir's fiction at this early stage: "Taqāsīm ʿalā watr al-rabābah" ("Solos on a Two-Stringed Fiddle"), "al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyyah" ("Night Trains") and "al-Tābūt" ("The Coffin"). In the first of these, an injured soldier returns to his wife and two young daughters from the front in Jordan (presumably he is an Iraqi volunteer who fought in the 1967 conflict against Israel). The story is typical of Khuḍayyir's early style, based on a reality made up of plausible events, characters and places. However, through the use of images that are

[17] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003 [1946]), 49.

powerfully incongruous, the author hijacks the depiction of this mundane reality and takes his narration to another level.

In the first paragraph of "Taqāsīm", a character descends from a train on to an empty platform at night. We only learn that he is a soldier from a brief allusion in the second paragraph when the light from a window falls on "his heavy military overcoat."[18]

بعد أن هبط درجات عربة القطار النازل شاهد خزائن الماء خلال ظلمة المحطة كزهرة حديدية مبللة تحملها أغصان متشابكة سوداء [...] والسكتان الحديديتان لامعتان، كسيفين أثريين.[19]

> After he'd come down the steps from the carriage of the down train he saw the water storage tanks in the darkness of the station like a damp metal flower borne on intertwining black branches [...] and the rail tracks were gleaming like antique swords.

In the context of the whole story, the unusual quality of such imagery challenges how we perceive the events being described. There is however a thin dividing line between these and images that are too melodramatic or outlandish and may alienate the reader in a negative way. For example, in the final lines of the story, the imagery moves into ambiguity and perhaps crosses the dividing line, becoming strange and awkward:

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[18] Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlakah al-sawdā'* [The Black Kingdom] (Cologne: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2005 [1972]), 115. It is worth noting that Ghassān Kanafānī, who was himself continuously looking for new ways to represent war in his fiction, was struck by this story when it was published in *Al-Ādāb* in 1968 (information given in the unattributed introduction to each of the following: Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Ru'yā kharif*, 5; *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah*, 5; *Kurrāsat Kānūn*, 2004 [2001]), 5).

[19] Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlakah al-sawdā'*, 115.

وكان الجندي ينام، يخوض في دم جروح أصابعه اللزجة، لزوجة الأرحام. وكانت امرأته تتسلل هي الأخرى في تلافيف شعره الرمادي القصير باحتراس.. باحتراس..[20]

the soldier was sleeping steeped in the blood of the sticky wounds on his fingers, the stickiness of wombs, and his wife too was creeping into the coils of his short grey hair, cautiously, cautiously.

In all these images we see evidence of "a purposely distorting imagination at work," to quote Walter Benjamin writing on Edgar Allan Poe, the latter a writer whose influence Khuḍayyir explicitly acknowledges when he praises him as someone who has expanded the scope of fiction in a liberating way, thanks to the "air of strangeness" (*jaw al-gharābah*) he creates and "the dream-like quality" (*ḥulmiyyah*) of the settings of his stories.[21] Benjamin writes in his article "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire": "Poe's manner of presentation cannot be called realism. It shows a purposely distorting imagination at work, one that removes the text far from [...] social realism."[22]

[20] Ibid., 125. On the less successful imagery in Khuḍayyir's *Mamlakah*, consider T. S. Eliot's criticism of the metaphysical poets, who are at times, in his view, guilty of forcing upon their figures connections which are not implicit, making sudden and unconvincing associations, and using "the most heterogenous ideas [...] yoked by violence together" (Eliot is quoting Samuel Johnson here), T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972 [1926]), 282-283.

[21] Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah*, 91.

[22] Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London, Pimlico: 1999 [1939]), 168.

Questions on the nature of reality - what is "real" and what is not - are implicit in "Taqāsīm": deeds that the soldier has either witnessed or actively participated in at the front cannot be divorced from the visions his mind associates with his experiences. In "al-Qiṭārāt al-layliyyah", Khuḍayyir is inspired by the medium of film to question further what constitutes reality, and to continue experimenting with his imagery.[23] The story is divided into three sections, each starting with a title that refers to trains. In the first section ("A Derailed Train") we see a couple, a soldier and a woman, enter an empty cinema to watch a film. What the couple see on the screen mirrors their own lives in some ways, even though they seem not to think much of the film and decide to leave the cinema, probably before the end of the film. The conventional representation of an unremarkable reality, based on external descriptions of the couple entering the cinema and exchanging a few words, is derailed by three factors. First, the fact that the soldier and his woman sitting together in the cinema are watching a scene in a film where a soldier and a woman are sitting in a train crossing the desert at night, makes the reader question which couple is more real. We are also led to consider which is more real out of the man-made, speeding, ephemeral train and the permanent, timeless desert. At one point in the film the sound is cut so that we, urban

[23] For some background on the genesis of this story and the others discussed in this section, see Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *al-Sard wa-l-kitāb* [Narrative and the Book] (2010), available as a PDF file without numbered pages from the author's Facebook page, 92-93, https://www.facebook.com/mohammed.khudair?fref[ts; and Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā: ṣurat madīnah* (Damascus: Dār al-madā, 1996 [1993]), 51-54; this book has been translated into English as *Basrayatha: The Story of a City* by William M. Hutchins (London: Verso, 2008). For an analysis of the collection *Mamlakah* as a whole, see Mālik al-Muṭallibī's article "'Bunyat al-bayāḍ': qirā'ah fī al-Mamlakah al-sawdā' [The Structure of Whiteness: a Reading of 'The Black Kingdom' (the short story collection *al-Mamlakah al-sawdā'*)]'' in Muṭallibī and Ṭahmāzī, *Mir'āt al-sard*, 5-51.

dwellers, says the voice-over, can for once hear "the faint, black music of darkness."[24] Secondly, the description of shots from the film provided by the third person narrator is interspersed with poetic interludes, for example of the night sky seen from the train as it speeds through the desert:

تنفرط النجوم، كأنما تنقذف في بئر، تعول فيه أصداء حديدية يضيق بها فتطفح نحو الخلاء الواسع وتنغرز في ظلامه كسهام طائشة، منهمرة حول القطار المندفع.[25]

The stars dissolve as if being flung into a well where metallic echoes howl, crowding the well so they overflow into the open country and pierce its darkness like stray arrows, raining down around the rushing train.

Thirdly, the depiction of space is not usually made directly through the eyes of the characters and there is a complex and often entertaining shifting of perspectives within such a short narrative. In the final paragraph, the "real" couple are in bed and the wardrobe mirror picks up images (or "takes photos [*taltaqiṭ ṣuwar*]") of objects in the room, while the couple - presumably wanting to make love on the soldier's last night – "fight greedily to stay awake."[26]

In "Taqāsīm" the trauma of war is evoked through disturbing, sometimes overwrought, imagery (see the example quoted above), while in "Qiṭārāt", war, although still the underlying topic, is approached even more indirectly through a complex mixing of

[24] Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlakah al-sawdā'*, 157.

[25] Ibid., 153.

[26] Ibid., 165.

perspectives and imagery that generally gives precedence to objects, machinery and space over human beings, without ever quite reducing its characters' humanity in a cynical way. In "Tābūt" the consequences of war are evoked through the depiction of two places invested with symbolic meaning: a railway station and a café. These two places, which are tellingly devoid of human presence, are connected in a darkly humorous fashion by the absurd wanderings of a coffin in search of a destination.

From the very beginning of the story, we are confronted with the power that war has to change the nature and use of common objects and places in unexpected ways: a makeshift morgue adjacent to a main railway station is full of makeshift coffins constructed out of bits of wooden packing cases that retain their old inscriptions in English and Arabic ('Whisky', "Glasses," "1970," "Ceylon Tea," "Handle With Care," etc.). These now appear side by side with the addresses to which the corpses inside the coffins are to be dispatched.[27] The narrative eventually closes in on one particular coffin. The coffin has been sent to different addresses, we understand, but each time it has failed to find a destination and has been returned to the station until finally someone has labelled it "unknown."[28]

The sense of emptiness, loss and loneliness that perhaps only an enclosed space full of coffins can trigger so powerfully is echoed in the setting of the second section of "Tābūt," that of a forsaken café (a phrase that is a sort of oxymoron as the café is the quintessential meeting place in all societies and perhaps even more so in the Arab world). This section of the story begins as follows: "They left, all of them, at some point: hours ago, yesterday, years ago (since war was declared)." [*brackets in original*] The following paragraph starts thus:

[27] Ibid., 167-168.

[28] Ibid., 169.

"No. They haven't left completely. They're still here, all of them, in the empty café [...]"[29] The narrator desperately wants to rebel against the new reality of war by summoning the spirits of the former customers of the café, who have perhaps perished in the war. The ghosts of men are present and theirs is a benign presence, unlike that of the coffins in the waiting room.[30] A glass placed too close to the edge of a table is prevented from falling by "a hidden hand," presumably belonging to the ghost of one of the men who used to frequent the café. However, the focus is on the objects left behind - red and blue formica tables, cane chairs - rather than on the people who have left, or even their ghosts, and only their reflection in glasses, water jugs, mirrors and windows survives.[31]

This story contains a striking example of the effect of *visual* art on Khuḍayyir's imagery - his ways of seeing and telling - which would be apparent even if he had not made it explicit much later.[32] The unclaimed coffin is lying on the pavement:

اخترقت الساحة قطة سوداء، من مكان ما، شطرها الضوء إلى مئات من القطط الصغيرة التي أخذت تعدو في كتلة واحدة، ما فتئت تنشطر إلى قطط أصغر فأصغر حتى تلاشت في الضوء. وفي اللحظة ذاتها انبثق شكل آخر، عند تلك النقطة التي اختفت فيها القطعة [كذا]، أخذ يتكون في اقترابه المباشر من واجهة المقهى. كان

[29] Ibid., 170.

[30] The dichotomy absence (of human beings)/presence (of their ghosts, souls) is central in "Ruʾyā kharif" and "al-Ḥukamāʾ al-thalāthah'" ("The Three Wise Men"), two stories written, and partly set, during the 1980-1988 war with Iran, to which we will return below.

[31] Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlakah al-sawdāʾ*, 170.

[32] Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *al-Sard wa-l-kitāb*, 91-98.

يخطو بقدمين خطوات متذبذبة، بأكثر من قدمين، وكانت يداه تتأرجحان، أكثر من يدين. وفيما هو يخطو كان لا يخطو: إنه يخطو في النقطة ذاتها التي انبثق منها [...] يتضح: صبي حليق الرأس، يعلق حقيبة كتب مدرسية في كتفه، وكان له وجه يشع.[33]

> A black cat crossed the square from somewhere, the light divided it into hundreds of little cats who began to run in a single mass that crumbled away, dividing into smaller and smaller cats, until they disappeared in the light. At that moment another shape sprung into being on the spot where the cat had disappeared, taking on more substance as it made straight for the front window of the café. It took wavering steps on two feet, on more than two feet, and its arms were swinging, more than two arms. It was walking and not walking: walking on the same spot from which it had sprung [...] It was becoming clearer: a young boy with a shaven head, a schoolbag over his shoulder and a face that radiated light.

This lack of explanation of where things are coming from and going to, and this unsettling image of physical fragmentation, are the opposite of the tracing of cause and effect that is the mainstay of conventional narrative.

In "Tābūt," a story where the absence of human beings is conspicuous, the final scene portrays the ominous meeting of the coffin that nobody wants with the café that nobody goes to. The only characters in the story function as mere extras in a short film where space is at the forefront, with its objects and ghosts. We see five men who drop the coffin on the pavement in front of the empty café and then leave; the schoolboy with a satchel on his shoulder and a face that radiates light approaches the coffin, looks inside, then closes it and

[33] Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlakah al-sawdā'*, 173.

exits the scene. These actions are described mechanically, almost as if stage directions are being given, including the detail of the boy looking at his reflection in the window. We are clearly here dealing with fiction whose meaning is not immediately accessible and is open to multiple interpretations. These texts deliberately challenge the reader through their imagery, demanding from us what Derek Attridge calls "a reading in the sense of a performance."[34]

However, we are left in no doubt as to the prevailing sense of loss with which the story, and incidentally the whole collection, ends: in the empty café, where the tables and chairs are said to be rubble, "emptiness reclines on the chairs alone."[35]

As ʿAbbūd has shown, stories like "Qiṭārāt" and "Tābūt" carry an implicit condemnation of war and death. Probably for this reason the two stories were ignored or dismissed by critics close to the Baʿth regime,[36] which steered the literature it sanctioned during the war with Iran in the 1980s towards an unquestioning chauvinistic celebration of bravery and self-sacrifice.[37] These difficulties notwithstanding, Khuḍayyir continued to develop his fiction in an uncompromisingly unconventional way as we will show below. On one hand, his stories remained structured around unsettling and poignant imagery and, on the other hand, they started to allude to an alternative space, Baṣrayāthā, the name he coined for

[34] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 130; see also 99.

[35] Khuḍayyir, *al-Mamlakah al-sawdāʾ*, 174.

[36] ʿAbbūd mentions the critic Bāsim ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Ḥammūdī's curt dismissal of 'Tābūt' in his *Riḥlah maʿa al-qiṣṣah al-ʿirāqiyyah* [A Journey with the Iraqi Short Story] (1980): 'The spirit of pessimism dominates this story as there is nothing in it except negativity, so that it is as if the martyrs [*al-mawtā al-shuhadāʾ*] have not carried out a great duty,' ʿAbbūd, *Thaqāfat al-ʿunf*, 288. ʿAbbūd emphasises that within this rhetoric a dead soldier is necessarily a martyr, ibid.

[37] Ibid., 288-289; see also Caiani and Cobham, *The Iraqi Novel*, 164-166.

the eternal Basra of historical fact, imagery and myth. This allowed him to move even further away from a conventional realistic kind of fiction, and in particular from one that celebrated war and violence.

2. The 1980s: An Autumn Vision

ولا ينبغي لنا أن تقلقنا كلمة "خيالي"، فالمقصود بها ليس المعنى الوهمي أو اللامعقول [...] هو معنى لقوة إشعاعٍ صادرة عن جوهر الشيء الواقعي، لا تنفصل عنه، كما لا ينفصل الإشعاع عن قطعة الماس.

محمد خضير[38]

The word "imaginary" shouldn't trouble us. What's meant by it isn't the illusory or the absurd [...], it's what shines powerfully from the jewel of the real thing, inseparable from it, as the shine is inseparable from a diamond.

Muḥammad Khuḍayyir

The 1967 war had a clear impact on the fiction of Khuḍayyir, then in his twenties: he started focusing on war and its consequences in his short stories, and war contributed to shaping his visions of Iraq. There is a clear thematic shift between the stories collected in the first part of *Mamlakah* and those of the second part. A similar shift happens between the writer's next two short story collections. The short stories written in the 1970s and collected in *Fī darajat khamsah wa-arbaʿīn miʾawī* ("At 45 Degrees Centigrade," 1978) are remarkable for their eclectic themes and experimental nature. However, the theme of war is

[38] Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah*, 29.

largely absent from these texts. The eight-year long war with Iran that started in 1980 brings war back into Khuḍayyir's fiction, but this time in a radically different way.

In 1995, *Ruʾyā kharīf* ("An Autumn Vision"), his third collection of short stories, was published. This collection includes stories Khuḍayyir wrote in the 1980s (four) and the early 1990s (three). In this section, we will focus on three of the four stories written during the war with Iran: "Ruʾyā kharif" (dated September 1983), "al-Ḥukamāʾ al-thalāthah" ("The Three Wise Men;" dated March 1986) and "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf" ("Yūsuf's Tales;" dated March 1987).[39] These stories indicate how Khuḍayyir built on his previous experiments to give his fiction a new direction, all the more significant if we consider the circumstances under which they were written. During the long and destructive war with Iran, Basra and the south of Iraq were violently contested battlegrounds. The war and its destruction were experienced by Khuḍayyir and his fellow southerners in a very direct way. Unlike many of his fellow Basrans, Khuḍayyir never left the city during the years of the war. To add to the dangers and material hardship of war, the Iraqi regime began in earnest to put pressure on writers to rally behind the war effort.[40] How did Khuḍayyir respond to this new form of pressure?

The first clear change that occurs in the stories included in *Ruʾyā kharīf*, as compared to those in preceding collections, is the introduction of a certain kind of narrator, often a first person narrator who is either an authorial persona with autobiographical traits, or a less

[39] "Ruʾyā kharif" and "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf" have been translated into English by Shakir Mustafa as "The Turtle Grandmother" and "Yusuf's Tales," respectively; Shakir Mustafa, *Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 9-13, 2-8. "Al-Ḥukamāʾ al-thalāthah" has been translated as "The Three Wise Men" by William Tamplin in *Banipal* 58 (2017), 25-35. Translations of these stories in the current article are ours.

[40] Caiani and Cobham, *The Iraqi Novel*, 164-165; see also Moosavi, "How to Write Death" and "Stepping Back from the Front."

clearly identifiable character, an intellectual, a writer or an artist, able to refer to Joyce and Hugo, al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb and Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr, in a way that distinguishes them from the characters in *al-Mamlakah al-sawdāʾ*.

This change is evident in the brief story that gives the collection its title. These few pages are a true turning point in the way Khuḍayyir writes fiction, as they inaugurate the phase of his writing, which extends to the present, when his texts are based on his "visions" which he sees as a clear departure from the prevailing fiction on war:

> قاموس الحرب في الأدب العراقي كبير ويتطلب تشذيبه. حاولت من جانبي أن أتمثل الحرب رؤيوياً في مجموعتي (رؤيا خريف) [...] لهذا بدت [هذه النصوص] نشازاً عن القاموس الصوتي والبنائي لسردنا الموروث.[41]
>
> The lexicon of war in Iraqi literature is huge and needs pruning. I have tried for my part to represent war as visions in my collection "Ruʾyā kharīf" [...] This is why [these texts] strike a discordant note in the music and structure of our inherited narrative forms.

The story begins with some obscure references to visions experienced by him in the autumns of past years. These are referred to as if they are titles of stories, or books, or films, between quotation marks: "The Severed Head," "Idle Hours in City Squares," "The Island of Statues," "The Hanged Flies."[42] It is with some perplexity that a reader used to the style of Khuḍayyir's previous stories will reach the end of this story without having learned anything about these mysterious visions. However, the vision experienced in the present autumn is clear. The present time of narration is 1981, near the beginning of the war with Iran, and the

[41] Khuḍayyir, "al-Qiṣṣah al-ʿirāqiyyah al-yawm."

[42] Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 11.

setting is clearly Basra, even if the city is never mentioned by name. As the unnamed narrator watches the ferries bringing passengers from the other side of the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab, the face that emerges is that of an old woman - the "turtle grandmother." The old woman corresponds in the narrator's mind to the midwife in whose company he had been evacuated to the countryside forty years earlier, in 1941, shortly after Gurkhas from the British army had occupied Basra. In the house in the village near Abū al-Khaṣīb he had met ten orphan children, evacuees like him, taken away from the chaos and anarchy of the occupied city. After this interlude or flashback, the narrator returns to the present, and to his apartment overlooking a square where buses stop. He has the habit of spending the evenings with the same group of friends drinking, eating and chatting. They drink toasts to the turtle grandmother, and quote Joyce, but the narrative becomes increasingly elegiac and nostalgic as the friends apparently prepare to leave for good:

قبل الليلة، لم يكونوا يراقبون ماضي أيامهم المستريح في الظل، ظل الطرقات والنخيل والأحلام. أما الليلة، فهم يقبضون على أعمارهم ويلمسون تحركها تحت أصابعهم على السطح الأملس لطين الأكواب المفخور. كانوا أقل فتوّة، أقل رغبة في الحديث، أقل ضجة، وأكثر هدوءاً، يطلون من هذا المكان على وادٍ يلوح تحت نظراتهم المتذبذبة، أو يودعون سفينة خرجت من الميناء باتجاه البحر.[43]

Before tonight, they used not to watch their past lives resting in the shadow; the shadow of roads, palm trees and dreams. But tonight, they were holding on to their lives, feeling them move under their fingers on the smooth surface of their earthenware tumblers. They were less youthful, less willing to talk, less noisy,

[43] Ibid., 15.

quieter as they looked out from that place on to a valley appearing under their unsteady gaze, or bade farewell to a ship that had left the waters of the harbour, bound for the open sea.

As we read, we realise that the adult narrator's ten drinking companions are most likely the ten orphans he got to know as a child forty years earlier. Then we read:

آه، أدركت اللحظة، أنهم كذلك جزء من هذه الرؤيا.. الأصدقاء المتعبون، الشائخون، السكارى الهادئون، العشرة المتقاربون... هناك.. هنا.. في كل مكان. حديثهم، أصواتهم، كلماتهم المتباعدة، تأتي من مكان بعيد، بعيد جداً.[44]

Ah, I've come to realise this instant that they too are a part of this vision, the weary, ageing friends, the quiet drunks, the ten intimate companions... there, here, anywhere. Their conversation, their voices, their words fading away, coming from a faraway place, very far away.

The ten adult friends may be figments of the narrator's imagination or may actually be present. Whichever is the case, the author is juxtaposing palpable evocations of space with sustained abstractions and visions, in order to address the loss and confusion of war and force the reader to address them in a "dynamic interaction," to use Iser's phrase, without suggesting there are conclusive explanations.[45]

[44] Ibid.

[45] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 187.

1995 saw the publication not only of Khuḍayyir's short story collection *Ruʾyā kharīf*, but also of a collection of lectures and essays in which he articulates his literary theories, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah* ("The New Tale"). In one of these essays, entitled "al-Ruʾyā al-marʾiyyah" ("The Visible Vision"), the writer, possibly defending himself from attacks against the direction his fiction was taking, explains his concept of the short story, specifically that inspiring the collection *Ruʾyā kharīf*. He identifies the three areas that contribute to the construction of a short story as "reality, intellect and vision:"[46] the writer is still inspired by what surrounds him (reality), but he then associates it with the images and experiences stored in his mind. When this recollecting function of the mind is completed, the writing of the story begins and the author gives shape to his vision as if the images and experiences were unexpected and had dropped unbidden "from the sleeves of memory."[47] In this half voluntary, half involuntary process, reality (for example, the actual chronology of events) can never limit "the energy of the ever changing wave of the story" (*ṭāqat al-mawjah al-qiṣaṣiyyah al-mutaḥawwilah*).[48] However, the reality for the stories analysed here remains one of war, or at least one overshadowed by it.

The writer defends his right to be inspired not only by the real world of his surroundings, but also by the exhilaratingly mysterious coincidences that happen in the borderland between reality and imagination, dream and literature: the land where visions are

[46] Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah*, 90.

[47] Ibid., 89. This appears to us to be an obvious allusion to Benjamin's discussion in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," where Baudelaire refers to Proust "[confronting this] involuntary memory with a voluntary memory, one that is in the service of the intellect" (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 154). However, Khuḍayyir does not refer explicitly to this essay, either out of carelessness, or because he is referring to an unacknowledged source that had not itself acknowledged Benjamin.

[48] Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah*, 89.

realised. It is worth mentioning that Khuḍayyir stresses the independence of fiction from the contingent reality in order to counter the inward-looking, parochial tendencies that he sees developing in Iraqi literature as a result of calls for an "authentic literature."[49] Of course his call for a fiction that is not shackled by the contingent reality could easily be seen as that of a writer who knows well the risk of being used as a tool by an authoritarian regime for political ends, or of retribution if his works are seen as antagonistic to its propaganda. Within the context of the officially endorsed war literature of the 1980s, the stories included in *Ruʾyā kharīf*, far from being escapist, are inherently subversive, as they stress the tragic, anti-heroic dimension of war. In this sense they are close relatives of the stories from *Mamlakah* analysed above, in spite of the numerous stylistic differences that separate the two collections.

Confirming the importance of the story "Ruʾyā kharif" in his technical development, Khuḍayyir refers directly to its genesis and sheds some light on the mysterious titles of the visions referred to in the first paragraph of the story.[50] More crucially, he writes that the story's points of departure were provided by reality (the war, the trucks taking soldiers and military hardware across the river towards the eastern shore of the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab, the front line at the beginning of the war with Iran). These images were then expanded by others, this time provided by memory. Here we evidently have an example of inherited memory: Khuḍayyir's mother left Basra for the safety of the countryside in 1941, while she was

[49] Ibid., 63, 91-92; see also Khuḍayyir, "al-Qiṣṣah al-ʿirāqiyyah al-yawm."

[50] The following is an example of how a vision takes shape. The vision of "The Hanged Flies" was triggered when a friend told him that, after seeing a rare public hanging in a city square, he had dreamed of ten hanged flies. Khuḍayyir then remembered that when he was a boy his father told him that he had seen ten flies hanging from ten matches stuck in the soil on a deserted bank of the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab. At the beginning of the war with Iran Khuḍayyir saw a military convoy crossing the bridge over the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab to the same spot where his father had seen the ten hanged flies (Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah*, 92-93).

pregnant with him. To this mixture of fact and memory, the writer then added characters to link the different time periods of the story: the turtle grandmother/midwife, the ten orphans and the ten friends. He then took the whole construction on a journey towards its own independent space, which no longer relied on the elements of reality that were the story's starting point.[51]

The author makes it clear that the imagination used to create his vision in the story "Ruʾyā" is still very much influenced by the 'burning reality' of war[52] and the fact that war makes this vision "autumnal" (bearing in mind that the whole collection, as well as the individual story, is called *Ruʾyā kharif*, "An Autumn Vision") is beyond doubt when we consider the finale of the story. Like the café in "Tābūt," the narrator's apartment appears to be empty for good. There is an implied, sombre connection made between war and the absence of the narrator's friends in the final sentences of the story:

انقضى النهار، وعدت ليلاً إلى النهر. الجسر ما زال قائماً، وقافلة الشاحنات تستمر في العبور.

لم يأت أحد من شلّة الأصدقاء إلى الشقة تلك الليلة، ولم يظهروا في الليلة التالية.[53]

The day passed, and I returned at night to the river. The bridge was still there and the convoy of lorries continued to cross over it. None of the group came to the flat that night, and they didn't appear the following night either.

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[51] Ibid., 93.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 16.

While images were used in Khuḍayyir's early stories to allude to the states of mind of his characters, here the dreams and visions of an individual are at the very centre of the narration, indispensable to the artist in his attempts not only to represent war, but also to move beyond it and defiantly counter its destructiveness.

This new predominance of vision and dream allows Khuḍayyir to propound a discourse that is intimately related to war, but transcends it, as he constructs the imaginary city of Baṣrayāthā. This is evident in the other two texts from *Ruʾyā kharīf* that we will now discuss.

In "Ruʾyā kharif," a vision created from a childhood memory can give solace, at least temporarily, to the narrator forsaken by his friends. In the second story of the collection, "al-Ḥukamāʾ al-thalāthah" ("The Three Wise Men"), we find another vision of Basra that moves through time, from its pre-Islamic, Akkadian time to the present time of the war with Iran.

A traditional storytelling tone, unusual in Khuḍayyir's fiction at this period, is established straight away by the title and the style of the narration, based on repetition:

ظهر الحكماء الثلاثة في المدينة.

السفراء الثلاثة ظهروا في المدينة أول النهار [...] تجول الحكماء الثلاثة، الحكماء تجولوا في المدينة عرضاً وطولاً [...][54]

> The three wise men appeared in the city. The three ambassadors appeared in the city early in the morning [...] The three wise men wandered about, the wise men wandered the length and breadth of the city [...]

[54] Ibid., 17.

This traditional style prepares us for yet another shift in the nature of what is to be represented. We understand that the setting is noisy, disorderly Basra during the war with Iran. However, the protagonists of the tale are three wise men from a mythical past. The city is also Baṣrayāthā - Khuḍayyir's imaginary construct of Basra past, present and future - which is the setting of all the stories of the collection. The real city of the 1980s is connected to its past, going back to the Akkadian and Babylonian eras. The leader of the three wise men, whose duty is to inspect the city and the front line and report back on the war to the god Ashur, is Atrahasis, an Akkadian epic hero from the 18th century BCE. We see in the reference to the uninterrupted existence of the city through millennia the author's desire to emphasise its resilience in the face of present catastrophes.

The three wise men inspect the city and then finally reach an inn called Manzil al-Ḥukamāʾ ("The House of the Wise Men"). In this mythical place, present day patrons are brought together with figures from the near and distant past:

1) some of the great intellectual figures of the Abbasid era, including al-Jāḥiẓ and al-Ḥarīrī, both from Basra;

2) poets of the modern era, in particular Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb;

3) the ghosts of soldiers killed in the war: the inn is clearly a place where the ghosts of dead men congregate, linking it with earlier stories like "Tābūt".

The description of this inn is another striking instance of Khuḍayyir's way of seeing and his awareness of light. The description of the cat and the child in "Tābūt" (which we have referred to above) may owe more to cinematic technique, more immediately striking and kinetic, but more ephemeral in its effect, while this one is more definitely "painterly,"

conveying more texture and structure,[55] and has the effect of making this mythical inn and the strange juxtaposition of people from different epochs physically present and real:

كان وسط القاعة مضاءً بصورة جيدة بضوء مصباح مظلل بقبعة من القماش يتدلى من إحدى العوارض الخشبية في السقف الشاهق إلى مستوى قريب من الرؤوس، يتسلط نوره الرملي على مساند الكراسي اللامعة وعلى أيدي الجنود الشاحبة، الخالية من الساعات والخواتم، المستقرة بسكون على سطح المنضد الصقيل المدهون بدهان حديث. في حين توشح عتمة خفيفة وجوه مجموعة أخرى من الجالسين في أطراف القاعة، لولا شذرات من ثقوب المدفأة وهالة المصباح تفضح ألبستهم الخشنة وأغطية رؤوسهم ولحاهم وكذلك أمتعتهم المحزومة في الأجربة.[56]

The middle of the room was well lit by a lamp with a fabric lampshade, hanging down from one of the wooden crossbeams in the high ceiling so that it was nearly level with the heads [of those sitting there], its sandy glow falling on the backs of the chairs and the soldiers' pale hands, bare of watches and rings, resting immobile on the smooth newly varnished table top, while the faces of another group sitting at the sides of the room would have been enveloped in a gentle gloom, were it not for the slivers of firelight from the stove and the distant glow of the lamp revealing their rough clothes, headcloths, beards and bundles of possessions.

[55] Khuḍayyir discusses in some detail how his writing is inspired by the visual arts, more specifically how to introduce the plastic arts into a written text, in his book *al-Sard wa-l-kitāb*, 91-98.

[56] Khuḍayyir, *Ru'yā kharif*, 20.

After the three wise men join the other patrons of the inn, al-Sayyāb enters the scene accompanied by a blind man from his village of Jaykūr. Al-Sayyāb has been expected, at least by the publican, for twenty-one years, and has been wandering through the city in search of the inn since the day in 1964 when his coffin landed on the pavement of Umm al-Burūm Square in the heart of Basra. That is to say, the timing of the main action is very precise, despite the temporal switches back and forth that take place in the story.[57]

The general perception, encouraged by al-Sayyāb's blind spokesman, is that the green notebook laid on the table by al-Sayyāb when he first enters the inn contains his long-awaited new poems "about the city and death and women," but in fact it is the notebook of a contemporary soldier-poet whom al-Sayyāb has encountered by chance in his search for the House of the Wise Men: "I met him one night in a hotel and he was wounded. He was a soldier, and he had been wounded in some battle. This notebook of his still had traces of dried blood on it."[58] This soldier-poet (Yūsuf al-Ṭaḥḥān) may have been a ghost: the manager of the hotel had not known that he was occupying the room, and when al-Sayyāb went back to the hotel he had vanished. Al-Sayyāb expected to find him among the soldiers in the House of the Wise Men but "[...] if he's cured of his wounds then he's alive, and won't be coming."[59] The green notebook is itself a collage, containing the soldier's diary entries, names and addresses, dates of his annual leave, poems of al-Sayyāb's that al-Sayyāb recited to him in the hotel and his own poems, in particular one inspired by his own vision/dream of al-Sayyāb.

[57] Ibid., 22.

[58] Ibid., 23.

[59] Ibid., 24.

The poem is highly ambiguous. It features mirrors and a beautiful woman (or women) and an old man who could be al-Sayyāb, so it is about women (al-Sayyāb was notoriously unlucky in love), sex and death and the anxiety or responsibility of influence. The following is a translation of "al-Fakhkh" ("The Trap"),[60] the poem inspired by the soldier's dream of al-Sayyāb, which the latter feels a duty to recite as a tribute to the younger poet:

« بانتظار الفتى

ينصب الشيخ مرآته في الطريق

وحين يمر الفتى

سوف يعطيه مشطاً كبيراً وصورة أنثى

وحين يروح الفتى

يتجمل للغانية

سيغافله الشيخ

يفتح صدره

ويستلُّ منه الخمار المزركش بالدم والياسمين

عندها سينام الفتى

[60] The poem is actually by the Iraqi poet Jawād al-Ḥaṭṭāb, a friend of Khuḍayyir's, on whom the character of the soldier-poet is based (Khuḍayyir, "Nisāʾ *al-Mamlakah al-sawdā*'", 225), and to whom the story is dedicated (Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 17).

سينام عميقاً.. عميقاً..

بانتظار الفتى

ينصب الموتُ مرآته في الطريق »[61]

Waiting for the young man

The old man sets up his mirror in the road

And when the young man passes by

He will give him a big comb and a picture of a woman

And when the young man begins

To make himself handsome for the pretty woman

The old man will take him by surprise

Opening up his heart

And drawing from it a veil embroidered with blood and jasmine flowers

Then the young man will fall asleep

He will sleep deeply deeply...

Waiting for the young man

Death sets up his mirror in the road.

Given its unsettling mood, the poem has a strangely liberating, if temporary, effect on the audience, "the comfortable pressure" of "an imaginary hot stone," to which they willingly submit. One of the three soldiers sitting around a table in the inn,[62] his wounds clearly visible

[61] Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 24-25.

[62] In addition to the three wise men, there are three soldiers at a table here, and three men carry al-Sayyāb's coffin and lay it on the pavement in 1964. Khuḍayyir's use of symmetry at various points

in the lamplight, stands up, aware that - unusual as it is for him to be present at a poetry reading - a response is expected from him and his fellow soldiers: "Okay, I've chosen a few words from among the many that my short life didn't allow me to say [...]"[63] In the soldier's few terse words, Khuḍayyir conveys a range of emotions from a degree of sarcasm directed at the whole enterprise of writing poetry in a war situation - and poetry/fiction that not many people are ever going to read in any situation - to an acknowledgement of the genuine possibility that poetry is a way of enhancing or even extending life:

لقد سعدت أنت بمعرفة ذلك الجندي الشاعر.. ولو كنا عرفناه مثلك لسعدنا به أيضاً.. فصداقة أمثاله تكسبك حياة إضافية تجولُ بها في مدن عديدة.. وتمنحك إحساساً بالوجود في كل مكان.. ومتى تشاء. حقاً لم نلتق به.. وهذا شيء غريب.. فنحن أيضاً اعترضنا ذلك الشيخ وغانيته في طريقنا إلى هذا المنزل..[64]

You're lucky that you got to know that soldier-poet. If we'd got to know him like you did, we'd have been lucky too. Being friends with people like him gets you extra life that allows you to wander around many cities, and gives you the feeling that you can be everywhere, whenever you want. We really didn't meet him, which is odd, since we did come across that old man and the pretty woman on our way here.

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adds to the mythical, traditional style of storytelling here. On the significance of the number three in the story, see also Aḥmad Ḥusayn al-Jār Allāh, *Uslūbiyyat al-qiṣṣah: dirāsah fī al-qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah al-ʿirāqiyyah* [Stylistics of the Story: a Study on the Iraqi Short Story] (Baghdad: Dār al-shuʾūn al-thaqāfiyyah al-ʿāmmah, 2013), 150-151.

[63] Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 25.

[64] Ibid.

For a while the ghost of the real Basran poet al-Sayyāb (d. 1964) and the partly imaginary soldier-poet of the 1980s war occupy centre stage and the three wise men recede to the sidelines.

In "al-Ḥukamāʾ" Khuḍayyir strives to connect Basra, or Baṣrayāthā, to its historical-mythical roots in an attempt to provide a vision of hope and resilience to his readers, himself, and all Basrans who live in a city hit by war. In "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf" ("Yūsuf's Tales") he imagines a vision of Basra that is different from "the actual city in which war made intellectual activity a worthless surplus," in the words of the story's translator.[65]

The rebuilding of various structures in a mythical city is a recurring subject in the stories included in *Ruʾyā kharīf*, incidentally an interesting counter to, or extension of, the often expressed idea that contemporary Arabic fiction mainly reflects, in both form and content, the fragmentation and unresolved disruption occurring in many parts of the Arab world.[66] As the Iraqi poet ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Amīr points out, the stories in *Ruʾyā kharīf* take place in "an imagined region [which] rebuilds what has been destroyed and transforms its ruined, shattered reality," giving the city a new form "through which it is possible to read the history of the terrible events that were enacted on its land."[67]

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[65] Shakir Mustafa, *Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 2.

[66] In his *Frānkinshtāyn fī Baghdād* ["Frankenstein in Baghdad"] (2013), Aḥmad Saʿdāwī gives surreal expression to the divisions that violently afflict Iraq today by creating Frankenstein/*Shismah* ("What's-his-name"), who is variously a composite of the Iraqi *shaʿb* (people), his creator's (Hādī's) revenge on behalf of all the victims of violence, Hādī's conscience, and a mythical figure used by people to explain things that they are too lazy to explain: a monster, a good person, superman, everyman.

[67] ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Amīr, "ʿAbra kitābayn? Muḥammad Khuḍayyir yakhruj min ʿuzlatihi al-dhahabiyyah [Through Two Books? Muḥammad Khuḍayyir Comes Out from his Golden Isolation]," Nizwā 7 (1996),

This is how "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf" starts:

عندما أعدنا بناء المدينة، بعد الحرب، اخترنا رقعة واسعة على ضفة النهر [...] وأقمنا عليها داراً للطباعة ورفعنا طبقاتها الاثنتي عشرة الحجرية الملساء كي يراها القادم من بعيد ساطعة بالشمس [...][68]

When we rebuilt the city, after the war, we chose a large plot of land on the river bank [...] and erected on it a publishing house, and raised its twelve storeys of smooth stone so that those approaching from a distance could see it shining in the sun [...]

Writing while the war with Iran is still being fought very close to his city (the story is dated March 1987), Khuḍayyir imagines what might happen after the war is over. This new city is a place where books, texts and manuscripts, and people connected with their production - printers, transcribers of manuscripts, illustrators, calligraphers and writers - are celebrated and esteemed.

As is the case in "al-Ḥukamāʾ", "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf" works on two main levels: on one level, the story is an attempt to counter the violent present of war through imagination; on the other level, the story is about the world of literature and, even more so, about the mechanics of such activities as editing, printing and calligraphy as aesthetic endeavours, which can themselves transcend time and circumstance.

Yūsuf the Printer, the head of the whole establishment, has a "great secret" that he reveals to the narrator: an old hand-printer that has survived the shelling of the city and dates

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http://www.nizwa.com/عبر-كتابين-؟-محمد-خضير-يخرج-من-عزلته-الذ/

[68] Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 51.

from Ottoman times. Yūsuf has had it restored by skilled craftsmen and now uses it to print his own "tales" in the basement. To the narrator, a budding novelist, it is also a link to much earlier times:

كانت الآلة الصامتة تنشر حولها مجالاً تحلّق فيه سحابة من روائح وأبخرة الحبر والأحماض والزيوت والمطاط والجلود والورق المتخلصة عن الطبعات الكثيرة للكتب النادرة التي أظهرتها الآلة للوجود. كان التيار الغامض الذي يصدر عن الماكنة يمسك أنفاسي، ويرجف أطرافي، وازدادَ وجيبُ فؤادي وكأني أتلمس بأطراف أصابعي الصفحات العتيقة في مجلدٍ مغلفٍ بجلد غزال من كتاب (كليلة ودمنة) أو (ألف ليلة وليلة) أو (قانون ابن سينا) أو (وصايا أحيقار الحكيم).[69]

The silent instrument created a space around itself, in which hovered a cloud of smells and vapours of ink, acids, oils, rubber, leather and paper left behind by the many prints of rare books that it had brought into existence. The mysterious current emitted by the machine made me catch my breath, made my limbs shake, my heart beat faster, as if I was actually touching the old pages of a volume of *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*, bound in gazelle hide, or *One Thousand and One Nights*, or Avicenna's *Canon*, or *The Proverbs of Ahiqar the Wise*.

The stress is now firmly on the world of books, manuscripts, writers and stories, with war as a mere background, an event that cannot harm this imaginary republic of letters any more. It is not incidental that the printer has been saved from the ruins of war to evoke in the mind of

[69] Ibid., 57.

the narrator the titles of works from the Arab-Islamic and wider eastern tradition as well as Iraq's pre-Islamic heritage (Ahiqar being an Assyrian sage).

It is impressive that Khuḍayyir's "visions" of permanence and hope were produced, according to the dates that appear at the end of "Ḥukamāʾ" and "Ḥikāyāt," in March 1986 and March 1987. In 1986 Iran conquered the Faw Peninsula, south of Basra, and launched a concerted effort to conquer Basra itself.[70] The Iranian military operation to conquer Basra failed, but the city was partly destroyed and most of its inhabitants left. Iraq recaptured the Peninsula only on 17 April 1988, shortly before the end of the war.[71] In spite of these grim and dangerous circumstances, the story "Ḥikāyāt" begins and ends on a note of idealistic optimism. The narrator says that in a few years he will possess one of the ten copies of

[70] Khuḍayyir mentions that the story had its genesis at the height of the military operations in the Faw Peninsula; see Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, *Baṣrayāthā*, 53. Khuḍayyir's two short stories can be compared to a text by a fellow Basran, Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr (see Caiani and Cobham 2013: 245). In another critical moment in the recent history of Basra and Iraq (the 2003 American-led invasion of the country), al-Ṣaqr chooses to write about the glory of Basra as a formidable centre of learning and creativity in his *al-Maqāmah al-baṣriyyah al-ʿaṣriyyah: ḥikāyat madīnah* ("The Modern Maqāma of Basra: the Tale of a City," published in 2005 in Baghdad by Dār al-shuʾūn al-thaqāfiyyah al-ʿāmmah, but written in 2002-2003).

[71] See Dina Rizk Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 31-33; and Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War. Volume 2: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press - London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1990), 373. In Khuḍayyir's ideally universal community of people joined by art and culture the contribution of Iran and its culture is clear. In his later works he often refers to Persian writers, especially poets (see for example Khuḍayyir, *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh: aqniʿa wa-ḥikāyāt* ["Gardens of Faces: Masks and Tales"] (Damascus: Dār al-madā, 2008), 14). In the inn of "al-Ḥukamāʾ al-thalāthah," we also find three or four scholars from *Mā warāʾ al-nahr* ("What is Beyond the River," the Arabic name for Transoxiana, but perhaps here a veiled reference to Iran), and three or four teachers from the Niẓāmiyyah schools, the institutions of learning founded in the 11th c. in a number of cities including Baghdad and Basra by the Persian vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 21). Perhaps we can read in these brief references an ecumenical, anti-war aside.

Yūsuf's great book of tales and read it lying on the steps of the square in front of the publishing house, "intoxicated by the warm early morning sun."[72]

It is possible to see something incongruous in the idealised passages that open the story and end it: the workers who are seen smiling as they recall "the joyous days of work"[73] are reminiscent of the smiling peasants and workers of Soviet-era propaganda posters. ʿAbbūd observes that the stories of *Ruʾyā kharīf* express an unfinished utopia, not quite a dystopia but a vision of the future that has many dark and disturbing elements.[74] These elements are even more apparent in other stories in the collection, all of which, as the author indicates, are intimately connected, "relying on one another [*mutaḍāminah*]" and "vouching for one another [*mutakāfilah*]."[75]

Conclusion

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[72] Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 59.

[73] Ibid., 51.

[74] ʿAbbūd, *Thaqāfat al-ʿunf*, 292.

[75] Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 9. Apart from "Ruʾyā kharif," "al-Ḥukamāʾ al-thalāthah" and "Ḥikāyāt Yūsuf," all the other stories in the collection conjure up a futuristic vision of a post-war city which includes numerous disturbing elements. For example, in "Ruʾyā al-burj" ("The Vision of the Tower") only half the inhabitants of Baṣrayāthā have remained in the city after the war. They no longer see the point of building hospitals, cinemas, theatres, so they have built a tower and used all their gold jewellery to make a statue which now shines on top of it, but find they cannot look at it for long without going blind; ibid. 30-31, 32.

Since the 1980s Khuḍayyir has written texts that can seem divorced from the immediate situation in his country, and such escapism, or at least a wish to write about alternative worlds, would be understandable. His increasingly indirect and sometimes obscure texts could also constitute an attempt to find a way to write about war in the face of the pro-war rhetoric of an authoritarian regime. On the basis of our readings, we conclude that the change in Khuḍayyir's fiction occurred primarily for technical and aesthetic reasons. He clearly felt inspired and liberated by a series of diverse writers, whom he began to know thanks to a reading habit that can only be described as omnivorous: he seems to have read a huge range of texts - from classical and modern Arabic texts to the fiction of non-Arab writers as varied as Poe, Joyce, Borges, Marquez, Buzzati, Goytisolo, Adiga, and books on art and architecture, apparently all in Arabic translations. He refers to these books and writers in some cases in passing, and in others in more depth.[76]

To summarise the nature of the change in Khuḍayyir's fiction that occurred in *Ruʾyā kharīf*, we should return to how his use of imagery developed. The early stories of *Mamlakah* are based on the representation of characters and events from Iraqi daily life, in which are inserted from time to time striking images that convey in small flashes bewildering, inexplicable facets of life. In the later *Ruʾyā kharīf*, each story consists entirely of a vision made up of images that move in space and time: the focus is now on the writer's own imagination, the images that he creates using, more or less consciously, what he sees, recalls, imagines. The title story, "Ruʾyā kharif," retains some of the tone and structure of the earlier stories and their relation to the external reality, but in "Ḥukamāʾ" and "Ḥikāyāt" these elements are absent from the very beginning. In the story "Ruʾyā." we still have a character who lives in a city very much like Basra at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war. The benign

[76] See for example Khuḍayyir's discussion of Borges and Poe in his essay "al-Ruʾyā al-marʾiyyah" ["The Visible Vision"], Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah*, 89-99.

ghosts of his friends remind us of the ghosts of "Tābūt" and other stories in *Mamlakah*, and "Ruʾyā" similarly contains enigmatic images that are open to interpretation but in any case lend a threatening or absurd note to an everyday scene, sometimes both simultaneously: the narrator looks down on the buses in the square, the departing passengers going heavily up the steps, the buses departing "equally heavily," "leaving the empty bus shelters like solitary hats scattered about the pavements".[77] However, as we move through the first lines of "Ḥukamāʾ", we are left in no doubt that we are reading about alternative worlds. In *Mamlakah* the external world of the Iraqi society of the 1960s (the contingent reality) is the starting point, the basis on which the writer builds his fantastic or striking images. In *Ruʾyā*, the visions come first and the contingent reality of historical and social fact is a frame of reference that is not fully represented but only alluded to in the text.

In an interview he gave in 2014, Khuḍayyir refers not only to the war in progress while he was writing the stories that were then included in *Ruʾyā kharīf*, but also to the criticism they attracted:

> [...] وجميع قصص "رؤيا خريف" براهين على الانفعال بالقراءة والبحث الأركيولوجي [كذا] في حوادث التاريخ ونصوصه. وقد لاحظ النقاد شذوذها عن "أسلوبي" القصصي الواقعي. ومتى كان لدي أسلوب أدعيه لنصوصي؟ كما قلت أردت أن أصنع كتباً مختلفة. كانت الرؤيا واحدة من بحوثي وافتراضاتي المحايثة للواقع وحوادثه العظمى التي مرت من جانبي. لقد أعدتُ في أكثر قصص هذه المجموعة إنتاج الرؤى القديمة لسكان

[77] Khuḍayyir, *Ruʾyā kharif*, 13-14.

وادي الرافدين لكي تتقاطع مع وقائع الحرب وتنقض فروسيتها العدوانية. لكن القصص فُسّرت على نحو أسطوري خاطئ لتهوين أثرها في قراء نصوص الحرب آنذاك. بنيتُ على وثيقة الحرب رؤيا فروسية نقيضة.[78]

> [...] all the stories in *Ruʾyā kharīf* are proofs of how I was affected by my reading and my archaeological [*sic*] research into historical events and historical texts. Critics have noticed how they deviate from my realistic fictional 'style.' When did I ever claim to have a particular style? As I said, I wanted to create different books. The vision [in *Ruʾyā*] was one of the results of my research, one of my hypotheses, implied in the reality and the momentous events going on beside me. In most of the stories of the collection I reproduced the ancient visions of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia so that they could intersect with the events of the war and counter its aggressive heroic narrative. However, the stories were interpreted erroneously as myths in order to diminish their impact on readers of the war literature of the time. I constructed on the prevailing documentation of war an anti-heroic vision.[79]

The collection *Ruʾyā kharīf* is a new departure in Khuḍayyir's fiction and shows how the Iraqi (and Arab) contemporary (a phase characterised by war and conflict) can be addressed

[78] Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, "Ḥiwār maʿa al-qāṣṣ."

[79] Whereas it is true that Khuḍayyir's journalistic statements and his critical work can be read as attempts to produce an interpretation of his own fiction (see Khuḍayyir, "Nisāʾ *al-Mamlakah al-sawdāʾ*," 238), we believe that a careful reading of *Ruʾyā kharīf*, and of the circumstances within which the stories of the collection appear, corroborate the characterisation of his stories expressed by Khuḍayyir here (ʿAbbūd reaches the same conclusion regarding the anti-heroic vision expressed in the stories of the collection; ʿAbbūd, *Thaqāfat al-ʿunf*, 291-294).

in literature. This vision is an alternative to the one offered in fictional works that address Iraq's recent troubles in a more accessible way. For example, novels like *Iʿjām* (2004; translated into English by the author as *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*, 2007), *Waḥdahā shajarat al-rummān* ("Only the Pomegranate Tree," 2010; *The Corpse Washer*, 2013) and *Yā Maryam (*2012; *The Baghdad Eucharist*, 2017) all by Sinān Anṭūn, and Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's *Frānkinshtāyn fī Baghdād* ("Frankenstein in Baghdad," 2013, winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2014) engage more explicitly with the Iraqi reality of dictatorship, war, occupation and sectarian conflicts.[80] Even if each of these texts experiments in various ways with style, narrative form and perspective (see for example the dream/nightmare sections in Anṭūn's novels, or the fantastic element in *Frānkinshtāyn*), such experimentation is part of a fictional narrative that remains more directly engaged with events and is clearly meant to express a critical view of the Iraqi sociopolitical reality from Saddam to today. The same can be said of the short stories of Ḥasan Blāsim with their emphasis on the physicality and surreal potential of violence and the Iraqi reality.

[80] The same can be said of novels by ʿAlī Badr, Naṣīf Falak, Muḥammad Ḥasan, ʿAbd al-Karīm al-ʿUbaydī, Hadiyya Hussein, Jāsim al-Raṣīf, Najm Wālī, Shākir Nūrī and Inaʿām Kachāchī. Masmoudi analyses aspects of these novels in her book on war and occupation in Iraqi fiction, from Saddam's dictatorship and the war with Iran, through the 1991 Gulf War, to the American occupation of the country (Masmoudi, *War and Occupation*). Moosavi analyses Batūl al-Khuḍayrī's [Betool Khedairi] *Kam badat al-samāʾ qarībah* (1999; *A Sky so Close*, 2001) and Janān Jāsim Ḥillāwī's *Layl al-bilād* ("The Night of the Country," 2002) and fruitfully compares them to fiction on the Iran-Iraq war and its aftermath written by Iranian writers (see Moosavi, "Stepping Back from the Front" and "How to Write Death" respectively). In all cases, the fictional works discussed can be defined as realistic. Moosavi's pioneering work offers an original comparative analysis of Iraqi and Iranian writers on the war. It would be exciting to discover whether an Iranian writer has moved in a similar direction to Khuḍayyir's, in both style and ecumenical approach.

It is clear that Khuḍayyir, rightly or wrongly, does not find this literary (mimetic) approach entirely satisfactory, perhaps as he looks for ways to "prune" the lexicon of war in Iraqi literature. In one of his brief reviews, he seems to express a veiled criticism of novels like Saʿdāwī's *Frānkinshtāyn* and Jamāl Ḥusayn ʿAlī's *Amwāt Baghdād* ("The Dead of Baghdad," 2008) for being unable to take off from the here and now of the Iraqi tragedy they depict, "to imagine a Baghdad without corpses."[81] If we look back at the works of the key Iraqi novelists of the previous generation, we can see that extreme adverse circumstances led talented novelists like Ghāʾib Ṭuʿma Farmān, in exile, and Mahdī ʿĪsā al-Ṣaqr, arguably in internal exile, to occasionally write novels that did not go beyond the novel as testimony (such as the former's *Khamsat aṣwāt* – "Five Voices," 1967 - on Baghdad's troubled 1950s, and the latter's *Bayt ʿalā nahr Dijlah* – "A House on the Tigris," 2006 - on the impact of the war with Iran on the lives of Iraqis.[82] We could argue that texts like these are more preoccupied with denouncing injustices and bearing witness to certain events (that are under the threat of oblivion or misappropriation), than with exploiting the power that fiction has to challenge readers to look at a specific reality in an original way.

Of course this qualitative shift can be achieved in fiction that remains in some sense realistic (see for instance al-Ṣaqr's *Ṣurākh al-nawāris* – "The Cry of the Seagulls," 1997).[83] In spite of the fact that Khuḍayyir the literary critic has always been eager to highlight the achievements of the Iraqi novelists of previous generations, he repeatedly calls on the new generation of writers to be more daring with their experimentation: they should go beyond the

[81] Muḥammad Khuḍayyir, "Frānkishtāyn al-ʿirāqī [The Iraqi Frankenstein]," review of Aḥmad Saʿdāwī's *Frānkinshtāyn fī Baghdād*, *Al-Ṣabāḥ*, 28 October (2013), http://www.alsabaah.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=57207.

[82] Caiani and Cobham, *The Iraqi Novel*, 115-128, 163-171.

[83] Ibid., 166-167, 171-176.

contingent reality and be more receptive to diverse sources of inspiration, such as the Arab-Islamic literature of the past and science fiction (a clear reference to what he is trying to do in his own fiction).[84] Generalising, we could say that most Iraqi writers today can be seen to move in the footsteps of the realist novelists of the 1950s generation, whereas Khuḍayyir's fiction remains resolutely unique, and at times, it could be argued, unnecessarily esoteric and even inaccessible.

However, despite their fantastical nature, the stories included in *Ruʾyā kharīf* promote a dialogue with the external reality of war and articulate a counter-narrative to that officially sanctioned by the Baʿthist regime of the time: one of aggressive nationalism and militarism. On another level, these texts, which have been created as a response to war, move far beyond it and contribute to shaping Khuḍayyir's conception of literature.[85] It is clear that the step the writer takes away from literary realism allows him to try to create a fictional world where past, present and future meet. As Agamben reflects on the concept of the contemporary, he refers to Osip Mandelstam's poem "The Century" (1923) and one of its central images, that of the poet who tries to "weld together with his own blood the vertebrae of two centuries." Agamben argues that the two centuries can be seen as the 20th century and the poet's own time.[86] In the light of our discussion of some of Khuḍayyir's works, we can claim that Khuḍayyir tries to achieve something similar: the welding together of, on one hand, the time

[84] See Khuḍayyir, *al-Ḥikāyah al-jadīdah*, 20; "al-Qiṣṣah al-ʿirāqiyyah al-yawm," 11; "Nisāʾ *al-Mamlakah al-sawdāʾ*," 233, 234-235.

[85] Khuḍayyir went on to develop this dialogue between reality and the world of literature and art in the hybrid texts he created after the publication of *Ruʾyā kharīf*: *Kurrāsat Kānūn* (2001), *Ḥadāʾiq al-wujūh* (2008) and *Aḥlām Bāṣūrā* ["The Dreams of Bassora"] (2016).

[86] Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 42.

of Iraq at war in the present and, on the other hand, his own time, a writer's time, which encompasses an ancient past and an ambiguous future. The actual reality of war and conflict that his country has been experiencing during his lifetime clearly affects this imaginary world and prevents Khuḍayyir from articulating a straightforwardly utopian vision of a future Iraq. However, his idea of literature is firmly based on an ecumenical, universal understanding of culture. This too is a powerfully subversive discourse vis-à-vis the violently intolerant worldviews and sectarian narratives which have come to dominate Iraq today.